A personal account of WEB (The West End Bulletin) and Tameside Eye (1976-1983)

Mike Harris

Since I instigated both the community newspaper WEB and the muck raking 'alternative' rag Tameside Eye, I should probably begin by giving a brief account of what led me to it. But first I want to stress the 'personal' nature of this account. It's not an attempt at an 'objective' history. In so far as it's a history of anything it's a look at one person's motives and inter-actions at a particular time in history. That said, I have re-read all the back-issues of both publications and consulted my own archives, including photocopies from the much bigger Tameside Eye archive currently lodged at Tameside Local Studies Library. So, the basic facts should be as accurate as any fact can be. But interpretation is all. Others who worked on the paper, especially Richard Armitage, who was my close collaborator and who kept it going when I resigned (twice) will almost certainly have a different one, and may well disagree about some or all-of my interpretations. That's as should be: without contraries there is no progression' [1]

So why did I instigate the two papers? The answer to that question requires a bit of backstory, so bear with me. My first job after leaving University in 1974 aged 22 was with DRUM magazine. I was their 'man in Zambia.' Based in Lusaka I was tasked to up the advertising revenue, increase circulation and write, or commission, all the Zambian copy for the East African Edition of what, at the time, was Africa's principal popular entertainment and (kind-of) current affairs magazine. The problem was I had zilch experience of any of the things I was supposed to be doing. The interview was at the main DRUM offices on Fleet Street in London where, to get the job, I grossly exaggerated the miniscule amount of student journalism I had done at Cambridge. Lucky for me the proprietor clearly wanted an 'Oxbridge man' for the former colony, because the post had only been advertised in an Oxbridge post-graduation recruitment mag[2]. I was aware at

[1] William Blake, Proverbs of Heaven and Hell, plate 3/4.

[2] The proprietor in question, Jim Bailey, interviewed me alongside the editor Dave Creffield. Bailey was a steel-haired, firm jawed ex-Hurricane pilot and the liberal son of the not-so liberal South African Mining Magnate Abe Bailey, who had been a friend and supporter of Cecil Rhodes. Jim inherited a chunk of his father's largesse and spent part of it on setting up DRUM in the 1950s. Beginning in apartheid South Africa and then opening editions in Kenya and Lagos, it employed African Journalists and supported nationalist independence movements in the 50's and 60's. However, by the time I got there it was starting to fall out with the very movements it had supported, because they were now in government and busily dismantling the democratic freedoms they had demanded from their colonial masters. I duly

the time that this was blatantly neo-colonialist, elitist, classist and, probably, a whole lot more other baleful 'ists.'[3] However, after taking the Oxbridge exam at the start of my third-year sixth, aged 18, I had failed to do the obligatory, wildly adventurous 'gap year' travelling. Instead, I had ignobly skulked around in Ashton-u-Lyne. So, in my head, DRUM was a Graham Greene/Evelyn Waugh-style adventure in exotic and, who knows, maybe dangerous parts that would at least prove to me that I wasn't a complete wimp. This clearly trumped any qualms I might have had about the political correctness of the proceedings. In addition, the possibility that this might be a stepping stone to becoming a glamorous foreign correspondent for, say, the BBC, did not escape me.

To be fair, I also thought I might do some good writing rather more uplifting copy than was currently being provided to a semi-literate readership in a new and 'developing country.' And, although it was obvious from the start that a Reithian remit to 'educate, entertain and inform' wasn't entirely at one with the practice of DRUM, I did try[4] and duly failed. Along the way, in the ten months I spent there, I did manage to learn something about journalism, which becomes relevant later. In addition, before I started each day's work for DRUM, writing and researching copy whilst doing as little advertising and circulation work as possible, I spent the very early mornings annotating Volume 1 of Das Kapital, because I thought it would be cool to be a Marxist revolutionary. Envisaging Revolution was still, at the time, very cool among a certain sub-set of the university educated young (check out all those Che Guevara posters). Wanting to do some good with my supposed literary skills, and helping start a revolution, were two of the motives that fed into my instigation of WEB and Tameside Eye (not the least because I had singularly failed to do either in Zambia).

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arrived in Lusaka to find that DRUM's so-called 'sex education' issue had been banned. The story of the early days of DRUM is well told by its first editor Anthony Sampson in 'DRUM: an African adventure and afterwards' (Published by Hodder & Stoughton, 1983).

[3] That said, those African states that had gained their independence in the 50's and 60's were recruiting western graduates in lots of spheres because, thanks to colonialism, they simply didn't have enough home-grown graduates to fuel their attempts at rapid nation-development. Its colonial masters had left Zambia with only 2,000 secondary graduates at independence in 1974 and no home-grown university graduates because, simply, there wasn't a university. The problem became clear to me when I tried to recruit an African replacement when I left. None of the likely contenders would do it for the money I was getting. Why? Rapid 'Africanisation' policies meant they were in high demand and could ask for correspondingly high fees.

[4] Also, the readership of DRUM was not the African proletariat/peasantry I had envisaged. It was much more middle class, in so far as Zambia had much of one.

Anyhow, In the early summer of 1975, after a dose of typhoid and the rather more welcome arrival of my university girlfriend, Jane Rogers (who was to be important in both WEB and Tameside Eye), I left DRUM and headed back to Blighty via an eventful hitchhike through southern Africa, and a less than pleasant stay with Jane's parents in Australia (we were young, broke, and ungrateful). We then spent a year in Leicester. Jane doing a very 'progressive' Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and me sundry manual jobs in warehouses and linen factories whilst trying, not very hard (and therefore failing) to trade in my brief DRUM experience for jobs in the UK media. After this, it was her turn to follow me, so we moved up North. She got a job as a probationary teacher at Glossop School, and I signed up for my own PGCE at Manchester University. This was partly because I'd got interested in teaching watching Jane train, partly because I couldn't think of anything else to do, and partly because I thought that peddling leftism to unsuspecting working-class children in Manchester comprehensives might be a quicker route to world revolution than writing patronising neo-colonialist copy for DRUM magazine.

I also decided to try and set up a community newspaper in the area where I had grown up, and where we were now temporarily ensconced in my parent's house. That's to say Guide Bridge in the West End of Ashton-u-Lyne. The motives for this were mixed. I vaguely wanted to put all that expensive elitist education to some useful purpose and thought I could best do this by blending the basic journalistic skills acquired in Zambia (write clearly, don't preach, hit deadlines) with that ever-vague impulse to radical political action.

I went to see Guy Heppner, the worker-in-charge of the West End community centre. Guy was middle class, bearded and bespectacled, with a calm welcoming manner, a toothy smile, and massive commitment. He was instantly enthusiastic about a community paper and introduced me to some people in the area he thought might be just as interested. The one's I remember are Jed Craven, an energetic working-class bloke with unfashionably short hair who, like most people, had come through the 60's and 70's untouched by counter-cultural values. To 23-year-old me, he seemed old, but that was probably more to do with his socially conservative views, his short hair, smart jackets, and creased trousers, at a time when flairs were at peak flair, and hair was still

long[5]. But he was probably only in his early 30's. Arlene Lomax was another working class local who would become a big player in the paper. A brisk, friendly and forthright woman with a gravelly voice, a cackling laugh and the kind of specs that make you look like you've had your eyes enlarged surgically. At the time Arlene was looking after two small children full-time at home but would eventually take on Guy's job when he moved on. Her husband, John - who also got peripherally involved with WEB - divided his time between work at the Clayton Aniline Chemical works in Openshaw (where my Uncle Des and my dad had once worked) and agitation on behalf of his union and the International Socialists (I.S.), a tiny Trotskyite outfit that was soon to morph into the only slightly less tiny Socialist Workers Party. Then there was John Nuttall, a good-looking art-college teacher a year or two older than me. John lived with his wife Cath (a secretary who would soon be typing up all the copy for the paper) and their baby daughter. They occupied a large, detached house with John's father who ran a small-scale building firm from it. John was to become a close friend and major collaborator in both WEB and the first incarnation of Tameside Eye, producing high class covers and graphics. Like me, he was a local lad who had gone away to university and returned different but wanted to 'put something back.' I also persuaded my mother to get involved. She had started work at 14 as a short-hand typist at Ashton Town Hall. She stayed at home while her three kids were growing up, then went back to work for the local authority as an admin assistant in the early 70's and had just trained to become a housing aid officer. There were others, but they slip my memory and I have no WEB archives.

An editorial committee was formed. There was no formal hierarchy. Everyone who turned up at meetings got a say. Plans were made and copy gathered and written. We were aiming for the launch of a bi-monthly 10-page paper in the Autum of 76, which was also when I started my PGCE at Manchester Uni. In practice, I did most of the writing and John provided most graphics. Cath did the typing and everyone else chipped in with the odd story, invaluable local knowledge and the hard graft of trying to sell the paper door-to-door to every house and high rise flat in the area.

[5] All that was to change within the year when Punk hit the scene.

In one of our first issues, we published some shocking stats from a contemporary local authority survey[6]. They made it clear that the West End of Ashton was one of the poorest areas in Tameside (a highly competitive field). 47% of houses didn't have a bath, 57% still had outside toilets, 58% didn't have a wash basin (presumably meaning neither in an outside or inside toilet) and most of the houses were deemed 'unfit…by reason of instability, dampness, poor natural lighting, unsatisfactory draining, and sanitary conveniences.' [7] By 1976 there had been thirty years of continuous economic growth under successive Labour and Tory governments. All of these had, in effect, been to the left of the 'New Labour' Government that was to take power 20 years later in 1997. All of them had been committed to more-or-less social democratic change but the West End of Ashton, like so many other areas across the country, had seen little of it. Despite this, its inhabitants remained patriotic and, like Jed, Labour voting (if they voted at all) but socially conservative. In the year that spawned the Anti-Nazi league and 'Rock against Racism' they were also distinctly unkeen on immigrants. They were particularly unkeen on the growing number of Pakistanis moving into the area having been enticed over here to do the work that white workers wouldn't, principally on nightshifts in cotton mills struggling to deal with cheaper foreign competition.

Political activity, when it happened at all in The West End, was mostly confined to voting in elections. Even then, the turnout was dismally low. People on low incomes vote less than people on higher ones and the poorer they are, the less they vote. This is perfectly reasonable. As the stats in the survey made clear, voters in Guide Bridge had had bugger-all out of the system in the past and therefore tended to be correspondingly cynical about the likelihood of it serving them any better now or in the future, whatever they did or didn't do politically.

There *were* more prosperous patches in the area, but not many. The ribbon development along Stockport Road between Trafalgar Square and Guide Bridge junction had rows of bigger terraced housing. The house my parents moved us into when I was 10 in 1962, was one of them. They bought it for £1,200 using money my dad had earned working abroad putting ventilation equipment in the very same factories that were

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[7] The report is in the Tameside Eye archive at Tameside Local Studies library.

undercutting Lancashire mills[8]. He worked for Hall & Kays Ltd, a light engineering factory just round the corner from the two-up two-down terrace we had lived in before the move.

105 Oxford Street was a hundred yards or so behind Stockport Rd, on a cobbled street that also housed a brewery, a blacksmith and a stables. Life there was in many ways little changed from the1930s, or even the late 19th century. My dad walked round the corner to work. The front door opened straight onto the street. It had a tin tub instead of a bathroom and an old outside toilet in a tiny back yard that my dad had crudely roofed over. The back yard gave out onto a narrow cobbled 'ginnel' that separated us from the back yards of an identical row of terraces where post-war Ukrainian immigrants lived. There were a few cars, TVs were starting to be bought, but my mum still donkey-stoned her front steps, my dad's parents lived just across the road and the rest of the extended family were scattered close by all over Guide Bridge. In contrast, the new house on Stockport Road had a bay window, a tiny garden at the front, a bathroom, three bedrooms (even if one was not much bigger than a shoe box) and a slightly bigger garden at the back, which my dad quickly concreted over so he could build a shed for his van and tools but, wonder of wonders, there was a also a big black telephone on a 'party line' shared with several other neighbours. So, when you picked up the phone there was every chance you'd hear them talking (and vice versa). Evidently, my parents were to a degree 'upwardly mobile', and certainly 'aspirational' as far as their kids were concerned. They wanted us to get the education that the system had denied them. That, probably more than anything else (alongside the 1944 Education Act) accounted for my going to university, getting the job with DRUM, and returning intent on paying something back. However, 'aspirational' they may have been for us, in most other ways my mum and dad were little different in culture and attitudes from the people living in those far worse conditions nearby.

Like them, my father, a life-long Labour voter, had become increasingly cynical about politics but, like them, instead of raging against the conditions revealed in the report, he preferred to vent his spleen on social security 'scroungers' and immigrant 'Pakis'. In this,

[8] Like many working class men of his generation, he was given to lamenting that we 'don't make anything anymore,' seemingly oblivious to his own role in bringing that about.

he was, therefore, far more locally representative than university-educated anti-racist 'progressives' like myself, Jane, John Nuttall, and Guy Heppner[9]. Of the core WEB editorial group, I considered only my mother, Jed and Arlene to be 'authentic', but mum dropped out early on: activism was not her bag. Jed was very active and a stalwart but always wary of the paper getting 'too political.' By this he generally meant too left wing. Paradoxically, the changes and improvements he genuinely wanted could only be made by a far more leftist government than the one we had at the time, or any we have had since. Even the obvious local 'authenticity' of Arlene and John Lomax was, in my head, compromised by their revolutionary socialism (which perhaps says more about my head than it does about their authenticity).

So, on WEB, my 24-year-old self always felt a tension verging on paranoia. I was acutely conscious that we could easily become objects of suspicion and dislike if we were felt by 'genuine' local people to be talking down to them, flaunting our education by airing too much knowledge, using too many long words or simply - as Jed would warn over and over again - by being 'too political'. All this would make it less likely that WEB could be part of the 'inevitable' socialist revolution I vaguely hoped for.

These contradictions ran through the paper's copy. Leftist attitudes hid themselves in articles addressing issues of genuine local concern and ran alongside stories that would have sat happily in the local weekly paper that we mocked mercilessly. The front page of our first 'summer special' for example was a black and white John Nuttall line drawing of West End Willy, our cartoon mouse mascot, in a Blackpool beach scene, accompanied by an invitation for kids to 'colour it in'. Articles carrying tenants' complaints about both private and council landlords gained us local readers but didn't endear us to local councillors, still less private landlords (but we didn't mind about that) and try as I might to frame politics in language that wouldn't alienate our readership, the leftism often broke through. For example, a local political theatre group, North-West Spanner, played regularly at The West End Community Centre. Right wing Tories had recently (and briefly) taken over Tameside Council. They were in spirit the forerunners of the Thatcher

[9] There's an argument to be made that the 'Red Wall' of automatic-labour voters in working class areas like the West End of Ashton was already starting to crumble long before it showed up decisively in 21st century elections. It was certainly no surprise to me when it happened. Both my brother and my 96 year old Uncle Des, who still lives in the West End, were Brexiteers and are almost certainly now Reform voters.

government that would gain national power three years later in 1979. So, when a Tameside Tory councillor on the board of the Northwest Arts Association attempted to get Spanner's grant removed because they were too left wing, we ran several articles defending the company and generally made a big thing of something I knew our readers can have cared little or nothing about.

In any case, it quickly turned out that I was far more interested in general muck raking than local stuff, however worthy. So, in issue 4 of WEB we introduced a two-page spread that we called 'Tameside Eye'. This allowed me to write pieces, for example, on borough-wide rental mortgage rackets and the new Tory Council's decision to let the racist NF use municipal buildings for meetings.

The 'eye' in Tameside Eye, was an obvious reference to the London-based satirical rag 'Private Eye', which was 15 years old by then and already a national institution. I also had in mind local 'alternative papers' I had picked up from Grass Roots Books' in Manchester: Manchester Free Press, Mike Don's City Enquirer, Rochdale Alternative Paper (RAP), Bury Metro, and others. All of these aspired to produce hard-hitting investigative local journalism, and carried stories existing local papers didn't, or in ways they wouldn't[10]. 'Alternative' Newspapers were in fashion. This was partly because it's easier to write a revolution than make one, partly because relatively cheap offset litho printing and Letraset headlines made near-newspaper standard layout at least theoretically possible[11], and partly because 60's counterculture had shown the way with high profile 'national' (i.e. mostly London) magazines like OZ. They had been popping up all over the place for some time and so, from the two page insert in WEB, the next step was obvious.

In the Spring of 1978, less than two years since I had enthusiastically initiated WEB, I resigned in order to turn 'Tameside Eye' into a separate publication serving all nine Tameside towns. In the circumstances, Guy and the others were remarkably good about

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[10] Mike Don was the Godfather of Manchester 'Alternative' journalism, the most principled man I have met and a dogged inspiration to me and lots of others on that scene. Here's why: Mike Don obituary | Books | The Guardian

[11] Turning the theoretical possibility of fully professional layouts into practice depended on the variable abilities of the volunteers who turned up to do the job and was always undermined by the manual typewriters that even top typists like Cath Nuttall had to use. These produced uneven and often greyed out type rather than the vivid hot metal variety. Electric typewriters existed and were better, if you could afford them, but they still couldn't compete for clarity with hot metal. And personal computers and computer printers were still a good ten years away from being affordable.

it especially given that I took key figures like John Nuttall and Jane with me, leaving everyone else to carry on as best they could. The front cover of the last issue of WEB in which I was involved (Number 11) duly featured a desperate appeal for more personnel.

I had no memory of how long WEB lasted after that until a few years ago, when I went to look at the Tameside Eye and WEB archive I had deposited with Tameside Local Studies library in 1993. That desperate appeal failed. No 11 was the last issue of WEB. The fact that I didn't remember that perhaps indicates how little I cared, or perhaps that I was sufficiently guilty about it to suppress the memory. My energy beam can be powerful but can shift quickly and easily.

Given the likely time commitment needed to make a full-scale Tameside Eye work, it was fortunate that the wearing 'discipline problems' from my first year of teaching were gradually fading. Nonetheless, the energy it must have required to do that perennially gruelling job full-time *and* The Eye confounds me now. Equally confounding, in hindsight, was the decision to set up the new paper as a collective again, given how difficult it always is to make collectives work. The best reason I can come up with is that collectivity was 'in' and 'hierarchy' was 'out', at least among the sub-culture I moved in. So, I cast the net wide. I enlisted Mick Lomas, a GPO telephone engineer and old friend from school. Somewhat bizarrely given his retiring personality, Mick became acting chairperson for a while, presumably because nobody else wanted to and Mick submitted to my pressure. I press-ganged newer friends like Lyndsey Fursland, who I had met on my PGCE at Manchester Uni. I got him to take on the 'What's-On' and Reviews section. Jane was probably responsible for the arrival of 'Second Wave' feminist friends like Mary Black and Liz Jeffares who she had met at a local 'consciousness raising' group. Then there were Trotskyite International Socialists like John Pearson. Pearson was a militant in the local government union UNISON and a constant thorn in the side of Tameside Council. Bert Ellicott was also on the group. He headed up Tameside Trades Union Council (a sort of local version of the TUC) which was well to the left of both the Labour Party and most other Trades Unionists at the time. Bert was also chair of the constituency Labour party (only to resign shortly after in

protest at Labour Government cuts)[12]. Others included Brenda Hilditch, a wheelchair user, militant nurse and disabilities activist who later became a Labour Councillor. Via my mother I enlisted 'Colin' (second name forgotten) one of her Housing Aid colleagues. Others included John Pearson's wife Maggie, Jeff Noon, who contributed some short stories and later became a sci-fi writer of some repute, and others who I no longer remember but who appear in the minutes of meetings in the local studies archive, so must have existed. On board from the start was Glen Routledge, who volunteered to be treasurer. Glen became a stalwart and, for me at least, a mixed blessing. Young, good looking, hard-working, stubborn and idealistic to the point of insanity, he played leftist Jiminy Cricket to my Pinocchio. 'Penny and Ernie' of North-West Spanner were also on the periphery. The local studies records show that Ernie hosted one of our early fund-raisers. So, in short, alongside press-ganged friends and Jane, I was obviously wanting to get together people who were part of local radical-left, political movements.

With sad inevitability, the decision to work collectively produced the same old collective problems. They had been nascent in WEB, but worse in Tameside Eye and cropped up right at the start. When we discussed what the new rag should be called, we agreed that 'Tameside' should be in there, but the politicos thought the word should be followed by 'Star' as in the Communist Party's 'Morning Star,' not 'Eye' as in 'Private Eye'. Now, at that time, most people on the left knew how bad Communism had been and still was but were reluctant to condemn 'the first workers revolution' out of hand. We would offer disingenuous excuses and lame arguments like, 'all industrial revolutions, including our own, required repression and suffering' or 'Stalin distorted Marx's ideas'. The former excuse of course ignored the far greater scale of repression and suffering in the Soviet Union, and was also inconsistent, given that we bitterly condemned the treatment of workers during our own industrial revolution. The idea that Stalin had some-how distorted Marxist-Leninism was a key mantra of trots in I.S, because it put clear blue water between Uncle Joe's 'bad' communism and Trotsky's good 'correct' version. Except, of course, Stalin did nothing Trotsky hadn't done or recommended. He merely

[12] His resignation letter is in the TE archives at Tameside Local Studies and the cuts in question had been forced on the minority Labour Government of the time by the IMF as a quid pro quo for a massive loan to stave off national bankruptcy. Inflation was running close to 30%, the economy was stagnant and the left-field minister Tony Benn was devising his own alternative to the cuts: a socialist 'siege economy'.

amplified it. Trotsky was complicit in any number of bloody, brutally repressive actions during the Russian civil war and in his ‘left opposition’ phase in the 20’s, he advanced ideas that Stalin applied with extreme prejudice in the 30’s.

By contrast, the majority-of ‘ordinary working people’ in Tameside didn’t wear such rosy coloured or distorting spectacles. If they thought about it at all, Communism was, for them, rightly synonymous with genocide, famine, show trials, torture, murder on an industrial scale, brutal exploitation of the working class, ethnic cleansing, endless queues and fuck-all on the shelves when you got to the front of them. The relentless anti-Soviet propaganda of the right-wing UK press happened, in this case, to be correct. Stopped clocks always tell the right time at least twice every 24 hours. Therefore, for me, then, wanting to associate our paper with the Stalinist hacks running The Morning Star was, at best, a triumph of political tribalism over sanity, or simply stupid - but a truly great idea if you seriously wanted to put off most of your readership before you acquired it. Most of the politicos didn’t agree.

I wanted to keep ‘Eye’ in the title because it would associate us with the investigative journalism of Private Eye but also because it would help inoculate us against the inevitable charges of being ‘far left’ and ‘too political’ because Private Eye had been set up, and was still run then, by the high Tory satirist Richard Ingrams. For sure, I wanted us to be a leftist local version, but I didn’t want the paper to wear a metaphorical lapel full of activist badges. I wanted it, like the section in WEB, to coruscate local abuses of power and privilege, and to support the underdog, albeit on a bigger scale and I thought most fair-minded local people would support this even if they disapproved of any detectably left slant. I won this preliminary skirmish over the title, and a constituting sheet of paper in my archives suggests that I probably won another battle. It describes The Eye as ‘radical’ rather than ‘left wing’ or Socialist. Nonetheless the terms of conflict had been set.

I also wanted Tameside Eye to be eye-catching, interesting and readable. Which is where the next battles took place, because ‘eye-catching.’ ‘interesting’ and ‘readable’ were not top priority for the comrades. But I couldn’t write the paper on my own, even if I had wanted. I was slowly getting on top of ‘discipline’ at school but the workload in schools is always heavy. On top of teaching and marking, I was rehearsing plays with

kids at lunch times and after school, so contributions from the comrades should have been welcome. Unfortunately, what they handed in was often so politically po-faced, dull and boringly written, that it would have struggled to interest even the convinced and converted. Happily, they frequently didn't hand in what they had promised and, over the first few issues, the worst offenders gradually drifted away[13]. To be fair(er), writing for the Eye was probably too much extra work for them on top of all their other meetings, actions, events and day-jobs, or maybe they were alienated by the editorial disputes about copy, or both. The ones who remained, like Glen Routledge, were, by definition, at least fully committed to the idea of the paper. Glen continued to dispute with me about the tone, angle and content of particular stories, but this was fine (ish), because he was walking the walk.

My principal antagonist in this first phase of Tameside Eye was not, however, one of the comrades. Like me, Richard Armitage shared a lot of their values. Unlike me, he stood on picket lines with them and had been active in what was then the famous Grunwick strike in London[14]. His beatnik beard, short hair, unfashionable black spectacles, beigey brown jumpers, corduroy trousers and sensible brogues gave him the look of a 1950s CND marcher. As I recall, his dad had been some sort of businessman which, in those days, at least in our circles, gave you the opposite of credibility. But I always felt that he had somehow inherited, or acquired by osmosis, his father's business-sense which he then applied to very-different ends (but Richard corrects me below)[15]. At the time, he was running Community Routes, a community transport organisation based in the Manchester overspill council estate of Hattersley. Thousands of working class Mancs had been dumped in the middle of the Tameside Pennines so that the slums they had previously lived in could be raised and rebuilt better (but in fact far worse, as it turned out).

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[13] For decades after, on the rare occasion when the topic came up, I amused myself by claiming that I had 'Purged' them. Sadly, this was not what happened.

[14] See Grunwick dispute - Wikipedia

[15] Richard demurs: 'This is hilarious. Yes, he ran a small carpet business (and, for a while, a small cinema chain too). But my father was not very good at business, which made him holding the post of Treasurer of the local Tory constituency party especially ironic!

Richard had brains, commitment, and energy to spare but suffered, in my view then, from at least some of the same left-wing political insularity described above. On the other hand, he always did what he said he would do and turned in more than decent copy on time. So, what was the problem? Well, I thought too much of that copy was worthy rather than enticing, and too nakedly leftist. His pet subject was, understandably, Community Transport, and he later became a significant national figure in that important if distinctly unsexy field. But the main thing, I eventually realised, was that Richard was my equal. John Nuttall had been in WEB, but his skills lay in a different area, whereas Richard was a good writer, a better organiser, and had as much determination and surplus energy as me. So, after he came along to one of our open meetings, probably just before Issue 2, we squabbled interminably while female members of the group like Mary Black sighed, for there was, in truth, a fair amount of dick-swinging going on beneath the editorial table.

The real problem between us (apart from testosterone) was power and the lack of a coherent division of labour to mediate it. Isn't it always? Without a formal leadership or hierarchy, the problems that have dogged collectivism through the ages always re-occur. People who do little get the same airtime as people who do a lot. People who aren't good at stuff get to try and tell competent people what to do. The people who can do the job and do it resent having to debate obvious points with folks who can't and don't, and who sometimes compound the issue by being thick, naïve, ignorant, or all three. Therefore, in nearly all collectives, informal hierarchies disingenuously replace formal ones but without the clarity and honesty which defined roles and powers can provide. No prizes for guessing which organisational mode I was starting to think might be preferable. Tameside Eye was my idea. I had set it up and gathered this crew together. I thought I wrote more and better than anyone apart from my partner Jane, and her time commitment was limited because not only was she still teaching, she was also trying to write what would become her first novel[16]and, in any case, I trumped her on journalistic experience, such as it was. At the same time, I didn't, and still don't, believe

[16] Separate Tracks (Pub. Faber and Faber, 1983)

in strict hierarchies. There needs to be wiggle room. Power needs to be spread about. Therefore, my position was contradictory and still is.

The other contradiction was that I was almost-as wedded in principle to covering lefty topics as the comrades. I just wanted to find a way of doing it without alienating the unconverted, and in as popular a way as possible. So, in the first year of publication we covered local Fascist and anti-Nazi activity, union 'struggles' for equal pay, sexism in the workplace, police persecution of gay men, tenants being ripped off by bad landlords, unfairly sacked union activists (etc., etc.,) and promoted all manner of left wing and feminist events and meetings. As a result, the 'popular' bit was too often left out and plenty of people would have been alienated. Parts of some issues *were* strong, with articles of potential interest to anyone, whatever their politics: a useful 'What's On' section', short stories and poems, a political cartoon (written by me and drawn by John Nuttall) and a lot of solid investigative journalism on local topics of national import. Nonetheless, divided counsels in 'the collective' produced a mag that shifted tone and emphasis nearly every issue. Too often the paper read like an in-house, left-wing trade-mag. Issue 9 now reads to me like the low spot in that first year: heavy, dry, and so grimly worthy it's hard to see how anyone would have bought it after a cursory flick through. Add an often less-than-professional layout and the decision to come out every six weeks rather than every month (basically because every month felt like too much relentless hard work) and it was hardly surprising that sales in that first year were not great. We averaged about 800 copies an issue, rising sometimes to 1200 (the exact figures are in the local studies archive). To put that in context, RAP sold around 8,000 and Bury Metro 4,000-5,000 so it felt like we were seriously under-achieving. Sales were simply not rising from that low base despite all the hard work, not the least going round scores of Tameside newsagents every six weeks trying to get them to take a handful of copies, only to find, next time round, that they'd hidden them underneath a pile of Beanos, or put them up on high with the Razzle Mags.

So, by the late summer of 1979, the Eye felt like it was going nowhere. Things between myself and Jane were log jammed too. Teaching and 'alternative journalism' hadn't left much time to spare for personal life, and her biological clock was ticking. It can only have been a month or so after she left me for London that I bailed out of Tameside Eye

for the first time (see ‘shifting energy beam’ above). I am no longer sure *exactly* why. Jane’s departure no doubt played a part. I certainly spent an awful lot of weekends travelling to and from her ‘squat’ in Camden. Maybe it was the teaching. In September 1979, I was entering my third year at Wright Robinson High School in Gorton, and everything seemed rosy. I had a bright A level lit class, a top set ‘O’ level, and was surfing lower ability discipline issues on a Flash-Harry platform of interesting left-field lessons, wit, and shameless authoritarianism. I was also writing, with my colleague and friend Rich Catmore, an epic about the militant suffragettes for a school drama group that was stuffed with talented working-class kids. So, after sensibly dumping the stupid and unethical notion that I could/should somehow teach/preach socialism to school children, I had inadvertently found real social and artistic purpose and a lot of fun to boot. The thought occurred that teaching might be a life-time career into which I should put all my energies.

Then it all turned on a penny. Somewhere around the end of that Autumn term, it suddenly seemed too easy. I could see myself as a grey, middle-aged, increasingly cynical teacher wandering round silent, cowering, classes, bored sick of teaching the same stuff for decade after decade, only pausing to lech at 6th form girls playing netball in the courtyard below. I retain enormous respect for friends who stayed in teaching for their entire working life and managed to maintain interest, commitment and energy. It just wasn’t for me. I’m a sprinter not a long-distance runner.

Depression loomed. Then, like a trendy fairy godmother, a job at Granada TV came up. It was for the local television news programme. This, in my head at least, would have merely been a stepping stone to investigative journalism with the company’s nationally networked investigative news prog, ‘World in Action’. I guess I got the first interview on the strength of my experience at DRUM and with Tameside Eye. After a second interview I was still in the running and had more-or-less convinced myself that I would get it. It was all down to the last one.

And I didn’t. So, to save my self-respect and sanity, I resigned from teaching anyway and concocted a ridiculously ambitious regional publication called, to begin with, ‘North-West Community Research’ or ‘Community Research North-West’ (to name but a few of its ever-changing names). I modelled it on similar ‘alternative’ national reports relatively

common at that time[17]. Generally, they investigated issues of concern to the left i.e. cuts, housing, fascists etc. I cashed in all three years of my teacher's pension payments. I then set about acquiring adult day and evening classes to supplement it (until the lavish grant money I anticipated came flooding in.) John Nuttall left The Eye at the same time and came in on it, but John was neither a writer nor a researcher, his marriage was breaking up, and he was drinking heavily, so, in practice, all of the funding, research and writing would be down to me. As this did not seem like a practical proposition, I attempted to enlist the people behind RAP, Bury METRO and Manchester Free Press in a joint venture. Phil Eades of Manchester Free Press and Tony Benge of Bury METRO came along with myself and John to a pub meeting with Dave Bartlett of RAP. At the time, RAP was the most successful of the local 'alternative papers,' with the biggest sales, and its own commercial printing operation to subsidise the journalism.

The meeting was a disaster. Bartlett arrived like a mafia godfather with two or three goon-like 'associates' in tow. Or at least, that's how my memory's imagination recalls it now. As soon as the drinks were in, he proceeded to diss my idea with extreme prejudice. 'You two look to me,' he said, glaring at me and John (and I remember the words pretty exactly, humiliation being such a great spur to retention) 'like two people who have failed at one thing and are now trying to do something even more ambitious'.

Hard to come back at that. I was furious though. Why had they bothered to come down from their Rochdale fastness just to insult us? I was busily trying to retain what shreds of dignity were available by not trying to defend myself against his arguably fair, if brutal and pointless, attack, when Bartlett quickly terminated the meeting, making it clear that they intended to go drinking elsewhere. At this point John, to my astonishment, asked plaintively if we might go with them. Bartlett flicked him a look of withering contempt and said, 'sure, if you want to come to Rochdale'. Neither I, nor any of the others, not even John, accepted the 'invitation'.

Remarkably, this did not put me off trying to make the research publication happen. I had shed my 'O' and 'A' level groups after the June exams, so I was able to bunk off in my newly ample free periods to attend meetings with Trade Unions, Shelter and other

[17] As I recall several of them are in The Eye archive at TLS library.

relevant organisations. My plan was to write a first draft of the first research report – on 'The Cuts' (as I recall) - by mid-August and get funding on the back of that. This in-itself would have been over ambitious had I not already decided sometime in April to get back involved with Tameside Eye. Not just to carry on where I had left off but, in close association with Richard Armitage, to completely revamp and relaunch. Why? Good question.

I recall feeling that The Eye was unfinished business. Following my resignation, it seemed to me to have become even more obviously leftist, worthy and less racily written than before and, with John gone, the quality of the graphics and layout had declined. Jane's departure clearly hadn't helped. She was now happily teaching former school dropouts in a Hackney FE college. As a result, the paper was now bi-monthly instead of six-weekly, sales had declined even further from an already low base, and it was now appearing without a flash of colour on the front because, given the falling sales, that wasn't affordable. Ergo, my magazine-baby was drowning, and it was all my fault for abandoning it. I may also have been hedging my bets in case the research publication didn't get off the ground. In that event I would have The Eye to stave off the depression that had descended when I didn't get the Granada job and had felt, aged 26, that my life was over.

I no longer remember whether Richard approached me or I approached Richard. But the two of us had a series of meetings about a re-launch between April and June 1980. During these, we agreed to do pretty much what I had wanted to do from the start. It seems likely that Richard's experience with the mag after my resignation convinced him that I had been at least partly right about the need to go more popular, and I had learnt to appreciate his business head, his organisational nous and his drive, so we began to work well as a team. A document in my archive dated 21 June 80 summarises the changes we planned. First off, we'd bite the bullet and go monthly. This was obviously an ask for a mag run entirely by volunteers, but bi-monthly was too infrequent to make the quick and consistent impact a relaunch needs, and the original six-week gap between issues had just been weird. What comes every six weeks? Malaria?

We aimed to up the sales to 2,000 within a year, put in place regular features with logos and banners so that people knew what to expect, what to look for, and what to

anticipate eagerly when they saw a new copy on the shelves. We would have fewer whole-group meetings (thank Christ) with more division-of-labour. Informally, Richard would still use his community contacts to write mostly short items but would very definitely be I/C of business, promotion and organisation. I was soon doing the bulk of the writing again and became editor in all but name[18]. We also aimed to get more ads, set up a proper-filing system to facilitate research and investigations and get into a lot more newsagents.

We both still wanted it to be radical and leftist, but we were aiming to go as 'populist' as possible at the front end. This meant refracting issues through the prism of personality. People are more interested in people than issues. Nothing new about that. We were simply trying to re-invent the wheel of popular journalism albeit with a radical, leftist but irreverent slant. Both of us pledged more time to make it work. I'd already resigned from teaching and Richard would try and reduce his commitment to the numerous community-based projects he was involved with. So, when we gathered together the rest of the team we were basically presenting them with a fait accompli. Except myself and Richard couldn't possibly run it without them so if they didn't accept it, we were stuffed.

Happily, they did. I recall no objections to the proposals, although there probably were, if only from Glen. But it must have been obvious to all that the paper had to get more readers or fold, for morale if not financial reasons. A couple of people resigned, I think, either on ideological grounds or at the prospect of (even) more work, or both. To his credit Glen, despite his inevitable doubts and reservations, stayed on. We also acquired from somewhere a young replacement for John Nuttall. Nigel Thorpe could draw but was to prove even more irritating (to me) than Glen.

We decided to work towards launching the first revamped issue in October 1980, and after that my idea for a regional research publication gradually faded away but not before I had researched and written most of a first draft. In the event, the 'new' Eye was different in some very important ways, but much-the same in lots of others, and we

[18] The documents say the intention was to split the editorial between me and him 50/50 but that never happened. Richard was always too busy for that so in the end it was probably more like 70/30.

shamelessly modelled ourselves on both RAP and Bury Metro. We kept the in-depth 'double-page-spread' investigative pieces in the middle. We ran a meticulous feature anatomising links between council officers, Trade unions, Labour Politicians and businesspeople. We covered the local freemasons (twice), local nuclear preparations, local funeral directors (the 'Death business'), the far-right National Front (local fascists), dodgy landlords, even dodgier builders and much else. But this time round we were always trying to focus the pieces on the people either causing the problem or affected by it. We continued to cover all the contemporary leftist and feminist obsessions: 'battered women' (as victims of domestic abuse were called then), trade union 'struggles' etc., etc., but focusing now on the people involved. And we wrote intending that the pieces would be read with interest by the uncommitted, not just radical left wingers and middle-class progressives (of whom in Tameside there were precious few).

We did more regular, shorter, features, each one with its own logo. 'Stinks and bangs' detailed the polluting activities of local factories, shops, and businesses. 'Posh streets' [19] profiled people who lived in the more desirable areas of Tameside (in-so far as there were any) detailing their local connections and business interests. These were-nearly-all 'off the peg' confections culled from electoral registers, Council Minutes, microfiched financial returns and ownership details from Company House in London, and from assiduously clipping and filing the local weekly. Its obits and lists of attendees at funerals proved to be a surprisingly useful way of mapping local power networks. By carefully putting all this information into our card index, cross-referenced from organisations to individuals, and thereby making connections between them, we were able to generate lots of decent copy without leaving the office (not that there was one at this point). Going monthly meant generating a lot more copy than before so 'off-the-peg' features and sarky snippets were a quick way of filling pages and making time to research and write the more demanding, longer, stories. But the snippets weren't *just* fillers.

They were part of the master plan. The idea was to lure the reader in at the start with easy, entertaining, satirical stuff that provoked interest without challenging casual

[19] A feature nicked directly from Bury Metro.

attention spans. The hope being that readers were then sufficiently engaged to gradually consume more demanding matter, until they arrived at the full-fat, meaty middle page 'double-spreads'. To this end, the cover of the first relaunched issue had a parody of The Sun's notorious 'page three' topless pin-up. Except we substituted a bikini-clad caricature of a well-known local builder with a racy come-on blurb about him in parodic Sun-Speak. This was the first of several 'Pet of the Month' spots promoting the content of the middle page spreads – an attempt to put piss-taking fun and satire right up front (the debt to Private Eye is obvious). 'Pet of the month' ran for several-issues until Nigel Thorpe, against my passionate objections, refused to draw anymore (possibly because he didn't get the joke).

Real-life contacts mattered too of course and, as sales increased, the relaunched Eye began to generate more of these, whether in the form of anonymous 'whistle-blowers' on the phone, or braver people who were prepared to meet us. Two who turned up after the relaunch were especially useful. Glyn Ford was a new, young, left-wing Tameside Labour councillor, one of the few on the council at that time who had a degree and more than two neurons to stick together. Glyn was happy to meet me in the pub where he dissed his old-guard labour councillor colleagues (the Tories were out again by now) and either confirmed or denied rumours about them, when not actually peddling the rumours himself. His motives may not have been entirely disinterested, of course. He was too bright not to realise that the more inside-info he gave us, the less likely was he to appear negatively in our copy, for no journalist, alternative or otherwise, wants to bite the hand that feeds him (or her, or they).[20] One of the stories Glyn gave us (I forget which) led to a witch-hunt for the source and for a time it looked like Glyn might get the chop. The Council Leader, Roy Oldham, was cleverer than that. He made him Chair of Education instead (then spending over 50% of the Council's budget) leaving Glyn with far less time to annoy 'The Leader'[21].

Another invaluable source was a faintly sleazy middle-aged environmental health officer called Tony Slack. I think of him now as being somewhat like the 1970s cop

[20] Glyn later became an MEP and leader of the labour group in Strasbourg.
[21] As councillor Oldham liked to be called. Thus, making it impossible for us not to use its German translation when referring to him.

Columbo, in a metaphorical rumpled brown raincoat and a literally beady-eye for interesting connections. I never worked out his politics or motives, but his job was handing out housing grants and inspecting properties for the Tameside Environmental Health Department. This, plus his membership of the local freemasons, put him at the centre of a lot of networks, and he just *lerved* gossip and dishing dirt. I got on with him famously and wrote stories small and large on the back of the tasty titbits he threw me, and he was pure gold on the local free masons. Furthermore, in 198, he got me and Jane a refurbishment grant for our first house purchase in Mossley. She was pregnant and we felt we needed to get out of rented accommodation. I was thinking that a house might also provide Tameside Eye with an office. We found exactly the right place. Ratcliffe Terrace was a small, still-cobbled cul-de-sac of six or seven, three-storey terraces in 'Bottom Mossley.' It looked for all the world like a street in a documentary about slum housing in the 1930s. It cost, as I recall, all of £7,000, which was ludicrously cheap even then (as it had to be because we couldn't afford a mortgage for more). The council grant we got via Tony was, I assumed, entirely legitimate. The house was in desperate need of refurbishment and renovation but my symbiotic association with the man who doled out the money no doubt smoothed the process. And so it goes.

After proofing and correcting this, Richard reminded me that one or other or both of us dutifully attended every full Council meeting in Ashton Town Hall, sitting provocatively in the area reserved for the regular press (I.e. The Ashton-u-Lyne Reporter). He writes, "It was all pre-digital, so it was essential we got a copy of the 'book', meticulously printed and bound for each Full Council Meeting, containing all the minutes and reports of all the council committees. Afterwards, we would wade through it in-order to serve up all sorts of stories and snippets in the next edition of the Eye. Most of the time, the meetings were excruciatingly dull[22], but…one time, Roy Oldham, having successfully whipped himself up into an incandescent fury, brandished the latest edition of the Eye in his hand and cursed us from the top table. This may have been the time we pointed out that this fervent supporter of comprehensive education had sent his son to Stockport Grammar School!"

[22] So painfully, bone achingly dull most of the time that I had clearly repressed the memory of doing it at all, until Richard reminded me. Thanks Richard. Now I have to deal with the PTSD.

Fairly early-on after the re-launch, I got out of anything that bored me, citing all the editorial I was churning out. But the 'boring' work was at least as important in bringing new readers and more sales as our better copy. The crucial legwork was put in by the people who Richard organised to sell adverts, painstakingly compile local listings, and most important of all, to go out every month delivering papers to often reluctant newsagents, collect sales income and take returns back from them. The same people also turned up to lay out the paper over a long weekend every month, often working into the early hours on Sunday before going to their real jobs early on Monday. The names of all those people I could find in my archives are footnoted briefly below[23] but a few deserve special mention. Glen Routledge again, of course, who worked hard on the Eye for years before he got sufficiently pissed off by my failure to meet his ideological standards or to sufficiently appreciate him (or both). As a result, the Confectioners in Guide Bridge, where his mum worked, refused to sell the paper anymore (N.B local politics matter). My wife Jane (who had returned from London in the summer of 1980) worked on layout thereafter, and wrote good stuff, including the aforesaid centre spread on 'battered wives', but she had other fish to fry. She was now teaching full-time in a Bury Sixth Form College, finishing her first novel, and had a child with me in 1981. Jane's friend Mary Black was involved from start to finish, worked tirelessly (if lugubriously) throughout, and found both myself and Richard equally annoying, probably with good reason[24]. Nigel Thorpe delivered cover after cover and most of the other graphics, with less talent and charm than John Nuttall but more reliability. I can't fully remember why he annoyed the fuck out of me, mostly I suspect for what I felt was a grim sulky personality, but in particular when he refused to can the skull-dominated black and

[23] Listed on early minutes are Glen Routledge (Treasurer), my old school friend Mick Lomas as 'figurehead chairman', John Nuttall (artwork and design), Cath Nuttall (painstakingly typing all the copy for layout) , John Lomax , Dave Houldsworth, Bert Ellicott, Jane Rogers, Brenda Hilditch, Mary Black (women's issues), Lindsay Fursland (reviews), Jenny and Dave Pope (who took over listings from Lindsay), John Pearson, (who put himself down at the start for 'shit stirring') 'Colin' (who worked at Tameside Housing Aid alongside my mother), Liz Jeffares and her Socialist Worker post-man husband Arnold, Alex Slade (who organised a fund-raising concert for the paper and volunteered for rock reviews), Carol Beckett (who seems to have had a trades union connection), Nigel Seth (artwork), Derek Patterson, Shirley Henshaw (who seems to have done some early distribution), Dave Woodhead (ditto, who was another friend made at the PGCE course), a 'Maggie' an 'Alan', a 'Trevor', Pete Rogers, Pat Baker, Peter Jepson, Mike Rogers, Alex Slade, Elsie and Dave Houldsworth, 'Penny and Ernie' and several others whose names are unfortunately illegible in the archive.

[24] I know this because she told me at the time.

white cover he had drawn to advertise a centre spread I had written on local nuclear preps. These were something of a lefty obsession at the time. I wanted to can the cover and my accompanying double page spread because there had just been an explosion of lethal chemicals stored with nil regard for anyone's safety in a dodgy Stalybridge factory complex. The explosion was national news and myself and Richard had quickly done research into exactly what had been released into the atmosphere above Tameside. Basically, amongst other lethal muck, an asbestos cloud had been released when fire torched the lagged piping that ran throughout the works. Also, a chemical still ran out of water in the middle of the night and exploded. Nice. So, I wanted to replace the Nuclear Preps story with a new double page spread about all that and, as I say, can the old cover. But Nigel dug his feet in, and we didn't want to lose the only person in the group at that time who could actually draw. Result, we ran with the skull and sales fell. Skulls don't attract readers when death is in the air.

Elsewhere, Cath Nuttall, now separated from John, re-applied her secretarial skills to vital effect, tirelessly typing up screeds of copy both before and during the lengthy monthly layout weekends. Bob Weedon, a primary schoolteacher with a great prose style and a neat way with satire (he was a life-long subscriber to Private Eye) joined after the relaunch and took on much of my writing role when (spoiler alert) I left again, this time for good. Bob's arrival felt somehow emblematic of what we wanted to achieve after the re-launch. He was a Labour voter but nobody's radical leftie and he'd have a go at anyone he felt was out of order, left or right. A real turn up for the books, was 17-year-old Dave Leech, a student on a Graphic Design course at Tameside college, who read the paper, saw an appeal for more help, turned up, and turned out to be a massively talented cartoonist. Dave went on to work professionally with Richard for many years after, and got his cartoons in, amongst other outlets, Private Eye, but he tells his own story (and more) in this footnote[25]

[25] 'My involvement with Tameside Eye began when I was 17 and a graphic design student in 1980. I started to see it in local newsagents and would buy it. I could see they needed help on the production side. I rang the number on the back of the magazine and offered to help. Very soon after, I was turning up each month to the cellar in Mossley and helping to produce the artwork for the magazine over a weekend. This was a fantastic experience for me as it taught me about real deadlines and working with printers. My graphic design course would allocate six weeks for me to design an advert. At the Eye production weekend, I would do ten adverts, and my work was being printed on Monday morning. I'd had my artwork published a few times before, but it was on the Eye that I first wrote something that was

The massive legwork put in by Richard and all these others got the rag into 120 local newsagents in the first year of the relaunch[26]. These were then plied with the posters and point-of-sale display boxes he had conceived, designed, and ordered. Sales went up, returns went down. He also got the books and records in order and even got us advertising and selling Tameside Eye 'merch' in the form of T shirts with slogans on them like, 'Tameside Eye is mildly offensive' and 'I never read Tameside Eye.'

As a result of all this, we reached our first-year relaunch target of 2,000 sales in only six months. This was from the all-time low of 600 just before the re-launch. By the end of the first year, we were up to 3,000 sales an issue. In comparison: before I dropped out sales had occasionally reached, as I recall, the heady heights of 1,200 copies a month. So, it felt like we were on a roll. A triumphalist memo I wrote to everyone at the time captures the hubris.

'Tighter control over the angling and style of stories has been crucial. The more romantic members of the group should be clear that the circulation of the paper has improved precisely because we have stopped writing worthy but boring stories on the fashionable left-wing theme of the moment and concentrated instead on cheeky exposes of local businessmen and politicians. This distinctive blend of Das Kapital with The Tatler, coupled with an emphasis on shorter stories ... has done the trick. And has given the paper the base from which we can now begin to move to look again at legitimate, less flashy, concerns and issues. If we add extra pages (4?) to the main body of the paper in September (exclusive of the What's On section), we could start to run a regular one-page "Campaigns" slot absolutely chock full of exploited women, unemployed workers, disabled people, and damp tenants. The other page can be used for extra ads and to make space throughout the paper for more graphics'.

However, after that, i.e. even after the successful relaunch, we never topped more than 3,500 copies sold[27]. That was the July 1981 issue which had a photo of Charles and Di's

published, that was something I didn't know I could do. The Eye production weekends involved a small team volunteering a couple of days of their time each month. We never missed a deadline. The Eye went into Manchester Free Press on Monday morning, and four days later, we collected five big piles of A3 sheets, ready for us to hand-collate and fold into the finished magazine. Folding sessions used to take place at Mike's cellar, Richard's flat, or Jenny's house. And culminate in a pub, our reward for a hard evening's work. The magazine was always written, designed, printed, folded, and distributed to newsagents on time, every month.'

[26] I thought it was 85 but Richard, who should know, corrects me. But heh, I doubt there are as many as 50 now; angry online lying bollocks or schmooze having replaced news (such as it mostly was).

[27] Richard thinks it was 4,000 and he may be right, but the available figures in my archive say 3,500.

wedding on the front cover, headlined, ‘No mention of the royal wedding inside’. Until that issue, we had stalled at 3,000 and duly fell back to it thereafter, so we assumed that the extra 500 copies had been sold to fond monarchists who saw the photo but not the headline.

Now, sales of 3,000 copies a month sounds tiny but the nearest comparable rags, Bury Metro and The Rochdale alternative paper ‘RAP’ (selling approximately 5,000 and 8,000 respectively) had been going far longer and had a more coherent traditional community to serve, whereas Tameside was an amalgam of nine towns that had been created very recently (1974). Ashton-under-Lyne, Audenshaw, Denton, Droylsden, Dukinfield, Hyde, Longdendale, Mossley, and Stalybridge each had its own traditions and sense of identity so ‘Tameside,’ created by Edward Heath’s Tory government, was still psychologically fragmented and widely disliked. Even so, when compared to the sales of contemporary alternative rags based in Manchester, Tameside Eye was doing well. Manchester had a population at that time of 465,00, including 20,000 students. In addition, young newly middle-class graduate ‘progressives’ were already colonising Didsbury and Chorlton in their thousands. And compared with the contemporary sales in 1980 of *national* political monthlies like the New Statesman (40,000–50,000 copies per week) and The Spectator (30,000–35,000 copies ditto) Tameside Eye was, proportionately, doing very well indeed. When the sales of the more directly comparable national publication Private Eye (roughly 100,000 – 120,000 at that time) are divided into the 56 million people living in the UK then, you discover that it was selling one copy for every 466 people. Its namesake Tameside Eye with its ‘tiny’ sales of 3,000 a month in a population of 217,000, was selling to 1 in 40 locals. When a common readership multiplier of the time is applied i.e. ten copies read for every one copy bought, we were notionally getting through to 30,000 people, which is more like 1 in 5 of the local population. Personally, I doubt the penetration was anywhere near that extensive, but it wasn’t insignificant. Anyhow, Councillors started to read us, people started to ring us with stories and there were lots of complaints, thank God, because it at least showed that somebody thought we mattered enough to complain.

We eagerly published the ones in letter form. We even turned the 'disgusted of Saddleworth' letter written by a local GP into a long- running series of piss-taking snippets about the good doctor's unknowingly comical sayings and doings. But the most vociferous moans came from the radical-left and the far right. The former were much the same people who I had foolishly tried to involve at the start but had been happy to see drift away. For they - the Left who had left - never seemed to be happy whatever we did, even when we were obviously supporting left wing causes. They had written complaining letters throughout the first year. John Pearson and Bert Ellicott were particularly zealous correspondents. Nonetheless credit should be given. Their unwillingness to compromise their beliefs and ideology in copy that 'working people' might actually wish to read convinced me that, if such left-wing revolutionaries ever got power, they would ban papers like The Eye only shortly after banning The Daily Mail and The Daily Express. There is nothing more intolerant than the true believer (whatever they believe). Of course, mainstream Tories objected to articles too. Especially when we pointed out their close social links with local fascists. These fascists were, we assumed, behind a group that tried to intimidate our newsagents and advertisers with fake solicitors' letters threatening legal action if they continued to truck with us. They were probably also behind a so-called 'Tameside Eye Investigation Committee' set up to find out who we were, and who eventually started ringing us up anonymously ('is that communist party HQ?') and even making death threats (see below).

In autumn 1981, having quadrupled sales in a year, myself and Richard were successfully reworking the Chemstar Chemical factory explosion story for the New Statesman (which was then more Left and radical than it is now). Two more pieces for the New Statesman followed. At roughly the same time, I scored a stringer's fee from a new, would-be trendy and leftish weekly called Manchester Flash. As I recall, it had been set up by a moonlighting Daily Express journalist with more idealism and hope than sense. He had optimistically remortgaged his house in-order to rent a large office complex in central Manchester and pay a full-time staff[29]. Richard, as de facto business manager of Tameside Eye, also began paying me a small monthly stipend to help

[29] And duly went bust some months later.

support all the writing and research I was doing. We also said yes to a local sixth former who wanted to do 'work experience' with us in the office we had by now built in the back basement room of the house myself and Jane had bought. So now it felt like I might have a freelance career in journalism, based in Tameside Eye but recycling its best stories elsewhere. I quickly discovered that the time needed for an unsupported freelancer to research, write and sell stories exceeded by far any likely remuneration, at least to begin with. It takes a long time to build up national contacts, and it helps if you already have a paid career in journalism to deal with the bills while you're at it[30]. And, in any case, six months later, in 1982, I resigned from the Eye again. Permanently this time.

The resignation letter (in the archives**)** suggests that I was fed up of taking the piss out of people just because they were reasonably well off and had some little power but who, like most of us, probably led perfectly unexceptionable personal lives, were nice to their kids and grandparents and tried not to be too shitty generally. It always helped if targets were doing something shady, back handed or actively corrupt, but it certainly wasn't essential. It was ironic of course that it was me who had pushed for that approach and had written nearly all of it.

If it was at least partly true that I was sick of writing knocking copy, I don't think it was the main reason. That would have been the death threats. We now had a baby in the house. Maybe, at that stage, if I had believed enough in what we were doing I might have accepted what was, probably, a very small risk to my daughter but I didn't. I was feeling protective. Myself and Jane were in that intense, fragile-feeling bubble that surrounds new parents and their first child. So, I wasn't prepared to take any risk on their behalf. At any rate, I handed in my notice in March 82 but seem to have kept on writing for it until July or August. However, as a way of removing risk, it was utterly futile. The paper was still being laid out and run from the new office in our cellar and the phone still rang upstairs where we lived. Furthermore, Richard had big plans to expand the community

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[30] So, I eventually switched horses and made a living in the even more precarious business of script writing, whereas Richard put his writing skills to work tracking innovations in the road transport industry in the days when trade magazines paid by the word.

information service (Iris Services Ltd) he had set up alongside the Eye, using the office in my cellar as a base, and already had bookings for community organisations to lay out their publications down there. That very quickly became a problem because, after I had left the paper, people from the cellar who I barely knew, or didn't know at all, kept coming up to use the toilet (there wasn't one downstairs) or demanding water for cups of tea, etc. Above the cellar, the house was still just a tiny two-up two-down, in which myself and Jane were not only working out how to look after a baby but also how to share its care equally, so the last thing we wanted was, for example, Mike Rooke, a gigantic redhaired poet, bumbling up like Shrek into our kitchen when one of us was changing a nappy, or arguing with each other over something inconsequential. So, I banned them from coming upstairs. Now, there are two sides to every story and theirs was more than reasonable. To wit: they had booked the room and wanted to be able to take a piss somewhere near it and also to have access to drinking water (the bastards!). Furthermore, the Eye had paid for painting the cellar and for the putting down of an 'industrial strength' carpet (of which Richard was inordinately proud). Richard and co had also mucked in with the decorating. I felt guilty about all this of course, so eventually paid for the carpet, but the guilt made no difference to my decision to evict them (guilt so rarely does when self-interest is involved). It was to Richard's great credit that he never reproached me, as he could have done, and with complete justification. He says now that it forced them to find proper rented premises in the middle of Hyde, above the Royal Bank of Scotland, for the new media company they had set up, Iris Services Ltd.

After I resigned, much the same things happened to the paper as happened after my first resignation. Despite all the indefatigable commitment of Richard and Bob and Mary and the others, the copy got duller and worthier, and sales duly dropped so, after a while, it went to black and white covers, then bi-monthly again and, in due course, would probably have petered out of its own accord. However, there was a coda.

Until my informal eviction notice ran out, the paper was still laid out in my cellar. So, one layout weekend on the autumn of 82, I swanned down to see how things were going (remarkably, nobody seemed to hold much of a grudge against me, but that may just be my memory). Bob Weedon was laying out a very good, well researched story about a

local businessman who kept crashing helicopters in the vicinity. He'd been running stories on these crashes for several issues (not the least because the dodgy helicopters kept flying over his house and Bob was nothing if not territorial). Issue after issue he went into increasing depth on the whys and wherefores. He now felt he had 'Biggles' (the name we gave to the businessman cum chopper-owner) bang-to-rights. Bob and Richard had gathered chapter and verse on safety regs allegedly ignored and good pics of the four crashes to put on the front cover. But Bob was stumped for a headline, so he asked me. I read the copy, in a flash suggested, 'illegal, dishonest, negligent and untruthful' and swanned back upstairs.

Three months later the writ arrived. This was not by any means the first solicitor's letter we had received and effectively ignored – and since the relaunch we had acquired a tame solicitor of our own who vetted all our copy for potential libels - but this was an actual High Court Writ. Bob and Richard felt there was nothing factually inaccurate in the copy and Richard might have gone to court to defend it. He had less to lose than Bob. He was single and rented a flat in a council high rise whereas Bob, who by now was crucial to the paper, had a wife, two small kids and a mortgage. So, they caved, ran an appeal to cover legal costs (to which I rather shamefacedly donated £500.00. Then, in May 1983, they printed a full apology on the front page of the last issue, and that was that. All the air had gone out of the balloon. Tant pis.

It was perhaps symbolic (if of little comfort) that I started the paper, had written the lion's share of the copy when I was active in it, and now had, in effect, been responsible for its demise. With a very little residual power, comes great responsibility. But it should also be noted most strongly here that I was only involved in at most 30 of the 43 issues. It was Richard, after he arrived for issue 2, who lasted the course and kept it afloat throughout, alongside people like Mary Black and Glen and Cath Nuttall who did the absolutely essential and critical work I couldn't be arsed with. All tribute to them.

Ends